The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Department of Education

The Massachusetts English Language Assessment - Oral Handbook

September 1994

Massachusetts Board of Education

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Dear Friends:

The Education Reform Act of 1993, as well as numerous national initiatives, calls for the development of enhanced means of assessment. Authentic assessments which support effective classroom practice are an important piece of our initiatives for school reform. The need for an appropriate assessment process for students with limited English proficiency is particularly acute.

To address these needs, the Massachusetts Department of Education has taken a leadership role in developing the innovative assessment process described in this booklet. This process is called the Massachusetts English Language Assessment-Oral (MELA-O). The MELA-O is an alternative means of assessing the or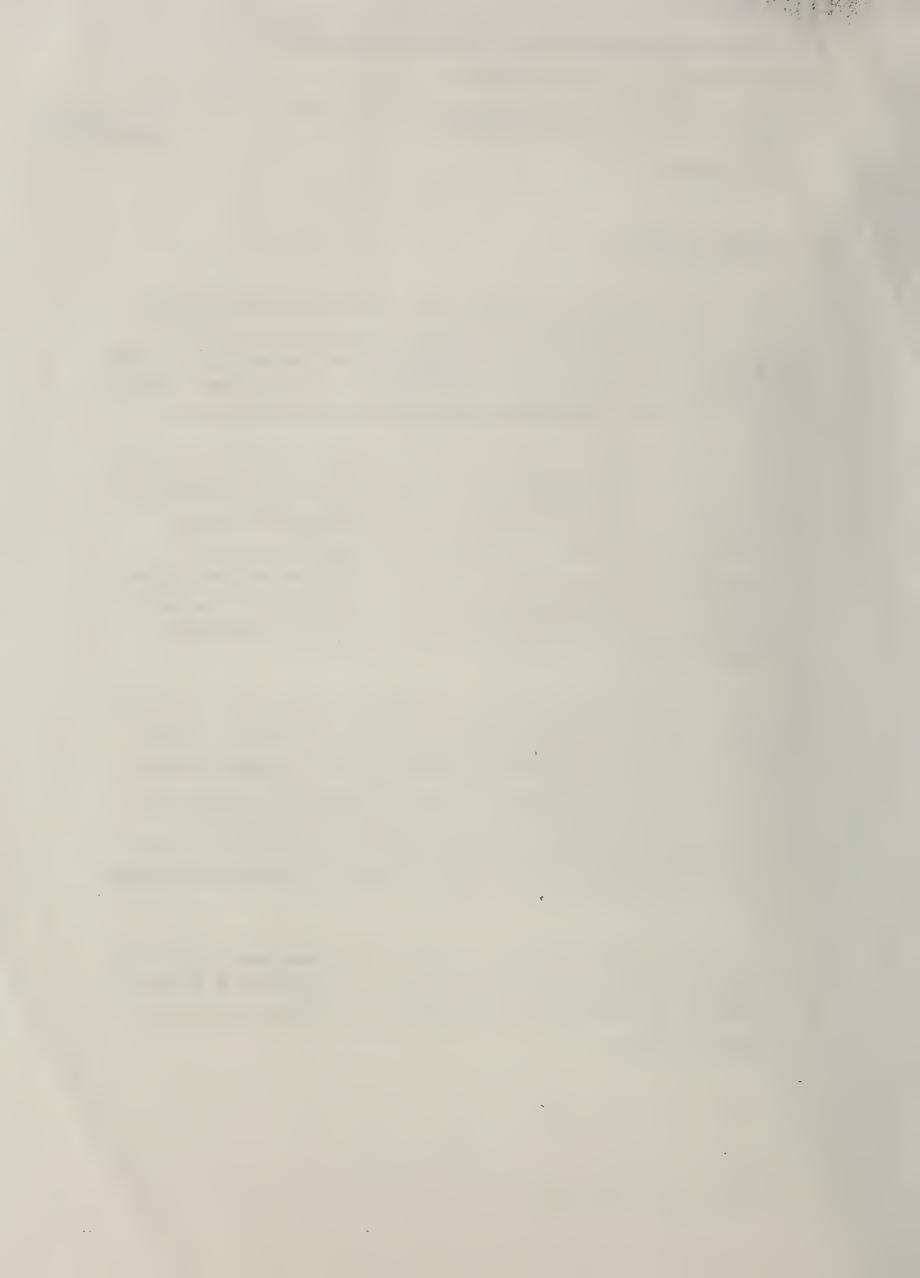al language skills of English language learners from a holistic perspective. It records student progress in ways which assist the teacher in planning instruction and activities which move learners toward a greater mastery of English.

The development and field testing of the MELA-O is the work of a group of Massachusetts educators, the Massachusetts Assessment Advisory Group. This working group has received extensive guidance and support from the Evaluation Assistance Center at The George Washington University. (See individual names, Acknowledgement page) Each of these people has committed extensive hours of labor and creative input to the project. On behalf of the students of Massachusetts, I thank them and commend their fine efforts.

I am pleased that educators from a number of other states have expressed an interest in the MELA-O. This innovative assessment process is an important addition to the tools which are available for teachers who are working with bilingual students.

Robert V. Antonucci
Commissioner of Education

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

This booklet is written to serve two audiences:

1. **Educators who are interested in obtaining basic information about the MELA-O assessment.** Proper use of the MELA-O requires training and practice. For more information, call the Evaluation Assistance Center East, 1-800-925-3223, or the Massachusetts Department of Education, 617-388-3300, x234.

2. **Teachers who have been trained and who are using MELA-O.** The content and format have been designed to provide an easy to read desk reference.

I. What Is MELA-O? (The Massachusetts English Language Assessment - Oral)

The "MELA-O" is a process for measuring oral English language proficiency. It is based on the concept of communicative competence, which consists of a learner's ability to understand, to speak and to be understood by others in English. MELA-O was developed in response to concerns that assessments were often disruptive and intimidating, especially when carried out by an unfamiliar individual. It brings meaningful assessment in line with good classroom practice, and provides useful information to the teacher in planning for the needs of individual students.

MELA-O measures a student's oral English language proficiency through a series of informal observations in natural classroom situations. This approach emphasizes that learners should be placed in situations where they can use language naturally in real communication with others. In this way, learners do not just memorize words and rules, but develop the ability to understand and to be understood.

"MELA-O measures a student's oral English language proficiency through a series of informal observations in natural classroom situations."

The MELA-O assessment system is based on two principles: 1) the classroom teacher is best qualified to assess a student's proficiency; and 2) cumulative observation results in better assessment. MELA-O permits classroom teachers to accumulate observations of authentic language use to evaluate and describe a student's oral language proficiency. Because this evaluation is done by a teacher, not an outside evaluator, it eliminates the high-pressure, formal testing situation which can often produce an inaccurate evaluation. Because observations occur over a period of time, the results are a more accurate reflection of students' oral proficiency.

MELA-O can also help a teacher improve learning within his or her own classroom. In doing observations and then using the MELA-O assessment with each child, a teacher must reflect on opportunities for language use in his or her classroom. This reflection may suggest useful changes or innovations to the teacher. It might also provide information that can be used as the basis for future language planning and in the development of Individual Learning Plans (ILPs). A discussion of effective teacher practices that can be used in conjunction with MELA-O assessment in language classrooms is included in section IV.

"In doing observations and then using the MELA-O assessment with each child, a teacher must reflect on opportunities for language use in his or her classroom. "

MELA-O is consistent with the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines (1986). The ACTFL scale allows raters to evaluate oral proficiency in English on a range from low to high: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced and Superior. In contrast, MELA-O provides a descriptive rating from 0-5 for each of four different aspects of oral production: fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. It also provides a rating for aural comprehension. In producing five specific ratings, the MELA-O attempts to reflect the complexity and individual patterns of language learning. This expands a teacher's ability to describe each student's performance and development. Like the ACTFL Guidelines, MELA-O describes the characteristics of speakers who fall under each level.

An initial pilot study using classroom teachers in 1993 and an expanded pilot study in 1993-94 both yielded overwhelmingly positive results. Teachers involved in both studies agreed that MELA-O results were accurate and descriptive. They also agreed that in using MELA-O they had learned things about their own classrooms, their own teaching, and the performance of individual students which proved useful in planning future instruction.

Frequent Questions:

- **Why use MELA-O?**

  The MELA-O is an authentic assessment which produces a rich description of a student's progress toward full English proficiency. The information provided can be used in planning specific learning activities which build on the student's strengths and provide the student with opportunities to develop the skills not yet mastered.

- **Does MELA-O provide comprehensive testing for LEP students?**

  No. MELA-O evaluates oral production and aural comprehension. It does <u>not</u> evaluate reading and writing. Assessments in the reading and writing of the second language may, however, be coordinated with the results of this oral language assessment.

- **How does MELA-O fit into the decision about appropriate program placement for an individual student?**

  MELA-O provides meaningful information about the student's English speaking and listening development. However, a great deal more information is necessary for program placement.

- **Can MELA-O be used to evaluate new students entering the district?**

  No. Only trained professionals who *know the student well* can produce reliable results with this assessment system. The familiarity between the evaluator and the student is one of the features that makes MELA-O a more meaningful tool for assessment. For entering students, one of the standard tests of English oral skills still must be used.

"Only trained professionals who know the student well can produce reliable results with this assessment system. "

MASSACHUSETTS ENGLISH LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT-ORAL (MELA-O)[1] Incomplete Version September 1994

The MELA-O is an observation scale which facilitates the assessment of English language proficiency of English Language learners in grades K-12. The MELA-O is a 6-point scale to be used as part of a comprehensive English Language assessment system. Placement and programming decisions should be based on results of both the MELA-O and assessment in other language modalities (i.e., writing and reading).

		LEVEL 0	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4	LEVEL 5
Comprehension		No demonstrated proficiency	Recognizes simple questions and commands; responds to more complex utterances with inappropriate or inaudible responses	Understands interpersonal conversation when spoken to slowly and with frequent repetitions; acknowledgement may be non-verbal, in the native language or target language	Understands/is capable of responding to most interpersonal and classroom discussions and classroom interaction when frequent clarifications are given	Understands nearly all interpersonal and classroom discussions, although occasional repetitions may be necessary	Understands interpersonal conversations and classroom discussions
Production	Fluency	No demonstrated proficiency	Speech is limited to an exchange of fixed verbal formulae (e.g. commonly used sentences and phrases) or single word utterances	Uses familiar sentences with reasonable ease; long pauses or silence are common and gestures are often used to illustrate meaning	Begins to create more novel sentences; speech in interpersonal and classroom discussions is frequently interrupted by a search for the correct manner of expression	Speech in interpersonal and classroom discussions is generally fluent, with occasional lapses while the student searches for the correct manner of expression	Speech in interpersonal conversation and in classroom discussions is approximately that of a native speaker of the same age
	Vocabulary	No demonstrated proficiency	Has limited command of isolated vocabulary for common objects and activities but comprehensibility is often difficult	Has command of words for common objects/activities but choice of words is often inappropriate for the situation /context; comprehensibility remains difficult	Has adequate vocabulary to permit somewhat limited discussion of interpersonal and classroom topics; usually comprehensible	Flow of speech is rarely interrupted by inadequate vocabulary; is capable of rephrasing ideas and thoughts to express meaning	Use of vocabulary and idioms approximates that of a native speaker of the same age
	Pronunciation	No demonstrated proficiency	Seldom intelligible and is strongly influenced by the primary language, including intonation and word stress; must repeat to be understood	Sometimes intelligible and is frequently influenced by the primary language and; must repeat utterances to be understood	Usually speaks intelligibly, though with some sounds still influenced by the primary language; frequently uses non-native intonation patterns	Always intelligible with occasional inappropriate intonation patterns; slight influence of the primary language may still be observed	Pronunciation and intonation approximates that of a native speaker of the same age
	Grammar	No demonstrated proficiency	Can produce only memorized grammar and word order forms	Often uses basic grammar patterns correctly for simple, familiar phrases and sentences	Uses basic grammar correctly; uses complex language structures that are often incorrect	May make grammatical errors; however, they do not obscure meaning	Grammatical usage approximates that of a native speaker of the same age

II. Using MELA-O

A) The Matrix

At the heart of the MELA-O assessment is a "matrix" (see page 4) by which each student is rated in two areas: the ability to comprehend and the ability to produce English. The *comprehension* category is inclusive, while *production* is further broken down into the categories of fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. Within each of the five areas, students are rated on a scale of six levels of proficiency. The scores range from 0, indicating no demonstrated ability in that proficiency category, to 5, indicating a level of ability that is equivalent to that of a native English speaker of the same age. The criteria for each level are described in the matrix and were defined to represent the wide range of possible achievement levels. Each student will receive two composite scores, one for English oral language comprehension and one for oral language production, as well as individual scores for each aspect of production. The composite score for production is derived from the individual scores for each aspect of production.

"Each student will receive two composite scores, one for English oral language comprehension and one for oral language production. . . "

Training is required before assessing students using the MELA-O scale. It is strongly recommended that the teacher/evaluator observe the student for a minimum of two months prior to beginning assessment. Level distinctions will become more easily discernible with practice in a variety of classroom settings.

Categories and Levels are described in more detail on the following page.

I. CATEGORY - <u>COMPREHENSION:</u>

The overall objective in assessing the learner's comprehension of oral language is to determine his or her level of understanding by observing oral and behavioral responses in the classroom setting.

The continuum of "Level 0" through "Level 5" provides a logical and measurable sequence for the teacher/evaluator observing the learner in interpersonal and classroom interactive situations. The descriptor *"interpersonal"* refers to oral exchanges on a personal level, while the *classroom* descriptor refers to discussion on educational content. The teacher-rater should assess either area equally. "Level 1" describes a student who can comprehend only basic English sentences and phrases. "Level 5" approximates the comprehension level of a native English speaker of the same age.

". . .younger learners of a second language will generally acquire the language without a perceptible accent."

II. CATEGORY - <u>PRODUCTION:</u>

1) FLUENCY: The five levels within this category focus on the speaking fluency of the learner. "Level 1" describes the beginner who uses single word utterances or short memorized chunks of language. "Level 5" approximates the language of a native English speaker of the same age.

2) VOCABULARY: Command of the lexicon is sequenced over five levels here. "Level 1" describes the beginner who may use nouns and basic verb vocabulary, for example, but with little or no *coherence* or comprehensibility. "Level 5" approximates the vocabulary of the native English speaker of the same age.

3) PRONUNCIATION: The sound system of a student's first language affects his or her pronunciation in the second language. Within this category, "Level 1" through "Level 4" highlight the progression of access and practice in using the second language. "Level 5" approximates the pronunciation of the native English speaker. The teacher-evaluator should remember that younger learners of a second language will generally acquire the language without a perceptible accent.

4) GRAMMAR: As in pronunciation, the syntax and other grammatical aspects of the first language may hinder production in the second language. "Level 1" through "Level 4" describe a sequence of language acquisition behaviors with a focus on frequency of errors. "Level 5" approximates the grammar of the native English speaker of the same age.

B) Preparation and Observation

It is important that the teacher-evaluator become thoroughly familiar with the matrix and its categories before making observations. Once familiar with the matrix, the teacher should make a series of observations over a period of time. MELA-O depends on a natural approach to observing a student's oral English language proficiency. In contrast to controlled or staged observations, naturalistic observations of typical behavior are done in the most unobtrusive manner possible.

". . .naturalistic observations of typical behavior are done in the most unobtrusive manner possible. "

Teachers do not need to create special activities for the purpose of assessment. In contrast to an oral examination with set questions and time frame, MELA-O requires the observer to look at the students' typical oral English as it is used in daily communication in the classroom or other school settings. Although it may be advisable to create situations in which students have ample opportunity to speak and listen, no situations should be contrived solely for the purpose of assessment. The observations are based on the everyday use of language by the students as they interact with their peers and with their teachers. These observations should be made during class time or other normal activities which form part of the school day. ESL classes in themselves should provide sufficient interactive oral English activities for such observations.

C) Interpreting MELA-O Results

The purpose of MELA-O is to obtain a meaningful indication of a student's oral English proficiency. The traditional labels such as No English Proficiency, Limited English Proficiency, and Full English Proficiency have little meaning to teachers or parents and have little impact on the activities that take place in the classroom. MELA-O provides teachers with a rich contextual description of a student's performance and allows the teacher to identify areas in which individuals and groups of students need improvement. These descriptions will help teachers to plan activities that will address student needs within their classrooms. The MELA-O assessment, kept as a part of the student's record, will provide future teachers with a valuable view of oral proficiency.

"MELA-O provides teachers with a rich contextual description of a student's performance..."

Frequent Questions

- In what types of settings are students observed? Can MELA-O rate oral proficiency in interpersonal situations as well as in academic discussions?

  Students are observed at any time and in a variety of settings, instructional as well as conversational, during regular interaction with peers, teachers and other adults.

- Are situations and activities contrived by the teacher for the sake of the MELA-O observation?

  No. The teacher should observe the student's interaction with English-speaking adults and peers. The process assures ample opportunity for students to interact in the normal classroom routine.

- How many times does a teacher have to observe each child to get a good sense of the student's oral proficiency before assigning a score?

   Holistic observation requires multiple evaluations of a student's oral proficiency in both formal and informal settings. For new students, we recommend a two-month observation period before assignment of assessment ratings.

- What score does a teacher assign a student who falls between two categories in the matrix?

   A category rating indicates full mastery of all aspects of that category. If they have not yet achieved full mastery, the lower rating should be assigned.

- What score does a teacher assign to a student who gives an appropriate, but non-verbal response?

   Non-verbal responses are scored within the comprehension category.

- What about a student who responds to a statement in a language other than English?

   English production has not been demonstrated. It may be that English comprehension is demonstrated.

- How can reliability be assured when two people assess the same student?

   Consistent, well-planned and well-structured training is the key to ensuring reliability among various evaluators. Training should be ongoing and teachers working with the same students should be given an opportunity to compare and critique their ratings of each student. As with any instrument, reliability is obtained with training and practice.

"A category rating indicates full mastery of all aspects of that category. "

- **Who rates the students?**

  Only people who have received training in the administration of MELA-O and have had an opportunity to observe the students for a sufficient period of time during the year.

"MELA-O should be administered by a person with sufficient proficiency in English to make reliable judgments. "

- **What training is necessary?**

  The training should focus on:

  - purpose of the instrument
  - understanding each category in the matrix
  - rating of oral language production in a natural and classroom setting
  - understanding of second language acquisition and oral language development states
  - interpretation of results and ways to improve instructional plans to enhance students' progress

  MELA-O should be administered by a person with sufficient proficiency in English to make reliable judgments. Teacher-evaluators should also have a fundamental knowledge of the theories of second language acquisition.

  Below are real examples of assessments conducted during the MELA-O pilot study.

III. EXAMPLES

<u>Student One - Second Grader</u>
Rating:

      Comprehension - 5

      Production - Fluency: 5
                    Vocabulary: 4
                    Pronunciation: 5
                    Grammar: 5

Composite production score would be "4" because the student has one area (vocabulary) which is not yet at the level of a <u>native English speaker of the same age.</u>

<u>Teacher Description:</u> "This student's comprehension most resembles a native speaker and she comprehends everything, including content. There are no lapses in her fluency and the student speaks to me in English, knowing that I am a native English speaker. She may search for a word or expression; however, she is not <u>often interrupted</u> by searching for language. There is a slight hesitation on idioms and vocabulary. Her pronunciation and grammar are perfect."

Student Two - Fifth Grader
Rating:

Comprehension - 2

Production - Fluency: 1
          Vocabulary: 1
          Pronunciation: 1
          Grammar: 0

Composite production score would be "1" since the student is beyond <u>no proficiency</u> and the teacher has "reason to believe she can speak more.

Teacher Description: "I give this student a 2 (in comprehension), not because of her language but because she doesn't speak at all (if the student did, the teacher might be able to know more). The student uses <u>single word utterances</u> because she is shy, but she still hasn't shown her potential. I have reason to believe she can speak more, but she hasn't shown it. If I make her speak, she says one word but <u>comprehensibility is seldom good.</u> She doesn't speak sentences so her pronunciation has to be 1. I can't grade grammar because she uses no word order."

Student Three: Fifth grader
Rating:

Comprehension - 4

Production - Fluency: 4
          Vocabulary: 4
          Pronunciation: 4
          Grammar: 4

Composite production score would be "4" in this case, making a holistic judgement from the individual scores is easy.

Teacher Description: "The student understands all the social directions but not all academic content. The student produces very well but there is still a lot of depth in the academic content which the student cannot reach (in discussion). He does not use many high-level vocabulary words but he has a good vocabulary. There is <u>slight</u> influence from the primary language of this child in speech, but it is very easy to understand him and he is close to a 5. In the student's grammar, sophistication is missing but <u>mistakes do not obscure meaning</u> and he is not <u>often inaccurate</u>."

IV. Suggested Practices for Oral Language Development

As discussed above, MELA-O invites teachers to evaluate and strengthen their own classroom strategies and approaches in developing their students' oral language proficiency. Classrooms that are student-centered, where students do most of the talking, are more effective in encouraging oral language development. This list of activities is therefore intended to serve as a starting point for teachers who find they must include more speaking activities in their classrooms.

The following suggested activities for oral language development should be considered in the context of whole language approaches to the teaching and learning of a second language. Most of these activities can be easily and productively combined with reading and writing activities. They can be adapted for use across level and across grade.

1. Storytelling - fictional or true
2. Role-playing
3. Games
4. Interviews
5. Debates
6. Drama
7. Show and tell
8. Peer-tutoring
9. Reading followed by discussion
10. Writing followed by discussion

11. Jigsaw: For example: determine the most economical supermarket in the neighborhood. To do this, prices for selected items must be obtained by different students. Each member of the group is given the chief responsibility for a specific portion of the learning task. Thus, the task cannot be successfully completed without the participation of each member of the group.

12. Cooperative projects: The members of the group work together to complete a group project, such as an oral presentation. Each member of the group receives a grade based on the evaluation of the group project.

13. Problem-posing: Discussion leading to the identification of a problem, usually social, which is important to the students involved, and a subsequent discussion of possible solutions to the problem. The three major components are listening, dialogue, and action.

Guidelines for small-group work

a. Keep group membership the same for a while - don't change group membership every time you do group work.

b. Give the group a specific task - don't just say "Discuss..." or "Talk about."

c. Discuss or model roles of group members before breaking into groups; this helps ensure more equitable group participation.

d. Group work should be concluded by a follow-up activity, during which the group reports, in either oral or written form, on its work.

Suggested Reading

Teachers are encouraged to consult the following references for more ideas and information about strategies for developing oral language:

Cant Stop Talking
George Rooks. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1983.

ESL for Action: Problem-Posing at Work
Elsa Auerbach and Nina Walter. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub., 1987.

Fact to Face: Communication, Culture, and Collaboration
Virginia V. Zanger. Boston, Heinle & Heinle, 1993.

Making it Happen: Interacting in the Second Language Classroom
Patricia Richard-Amato. New York: Lorgman Inc., 1988.

The Natural Approach - Language Acquisition in the Classroom
Stephen D. Krashen and Tracy D. Terrell. New York: Pergamon Press, 1983.